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Abraham focused on future

Killer who gained notoriety now seeks to start over

January 19, 2007

BY L.L. BRASIER, FRANK WITSIL and JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Nathaniel Abraham, age 21, has got plans.

He plans to move into his own one-bedroom apartment in Bay City. He plans to start working as a custodian at a factory there. And he pledges not to return to the ways that landed him in a juvenile prison for much of his life on a murder conviction.

On Thursday, Abraham, who killed a man at age 11 and became the youngest person ever charged as an adult with first-degree murder in Michigan, strutted out of the Oakland County courthouse in Pontiac a free man -- sporting a smile, a new suit and a new lease on life.

"It feels good to be free," he said outside the courtroom after his final hearing before Oakland County Family Court Judge Eugene Arthur Moore.

"Right now, I just want to focus on the future, man. Focus on the future," he said. "I think that's what's important right now. What I need to show ... is that I can be a successful citizen like everybody else."

He was convicted in 1999 of second-degree murder for the 1997 death of 18-year-old Ronnie Greene Jr. and sentenced, in 2000, as a juvenile. State law called for his release with his 21st birthday today.

After all the previous court hearings, dozens of them in which Abraham appeared handcuffed and in jail garb, he came dressed to the nines for Thursday's proceedings, in an ivory pin-striped suit with pink shirt and matching alligator shoes and a black rabbit coat.

To Moore, who sentenced him as a juvenile, he said: "What I feel is you saw something in me before a lot of other people did.

"I'm not going back to society to cause any other family any hurt," he continued.

Greene's sister, Nichole Edwards, 33, of Auburn Hills fought tears as she huddled with other family members in the courthouse hallway.

"They have something to celebrate," she said as Abraham's family hugged nearby. "We have lost a treasure. All we have is a cemetery plot to go to.

"I hope Nathaniel doesn't let us down."

Meeting such a burden may not be easy, experts say, but Abraham will have some help.

Social worker Annette Henderson, who has counseled Abraham for several years, told the court she would continue to provide guidance and advice.

"He's getting a second opportunity at life, even though he took a life," Henderson told the judge. "There is still more learning and growing and maturity to take place, and I think Nate knows that."

It is unclear how much financial support Abraham will receive, however. He and his attorney say Abraham will continue to receive a subsidy to cover living expenses, education and counseling. State Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said

Abraham would not receive state assistance, though.

He has been living in a halfway house in Bay City since July, and officials at the house said they would continue to help Abraham adjust.

Fate in his own hands

Greene was standing outside a party store in Pontiac when he was struck in the head with a bullet fired from a .22-caliber rifle by Abraham. The 11-year-old later told police he was shooting from a hilltop at trees.

"What put me in that situation," he said outside the courtroom, "was not listening to my parents.

"Nobody's perfect. I had to experience some bumps in the road, and just kept working hard to make myself a better person for this day," said Abraham, who also earned his high school diploma in custody. He has a job as a maintenance worker lined up.

Moore told Abraham his fate now rests in his own hands.

"He now has the opportunity to say to himself and all of us: 'I take responsibility for the fact that I killed another person, but I can best show my regrets and sympathy to the family to whom I caused so much grief by succeeding -- by being a decent human being,' " the judge said in releasing Abraham.

Abraham's mother, Gloria Abraham, urged her son to look to God for direction. "I know he can do it with the help of the Lord and his family."

A chance to succeed

Experts familiar with the juvenile system said Abraham's chances for re-entering society are remarkably good, if he can get past his own notoriety.

Leonard Dixon, director of the Department of Human Services' Bureau of Juvenile Justice, said 78% of graduates of the state's juvenile treatment programs remain free of criminal convictions two years after release.

"Now, you can't guarantee anything, but I still say that the emphasis now has to be on how the community tries to help these kids," Dixon said. "We can do everything we can in the system, but the community needs to step up because these kids are part of that community."

Prosecutors were less optimistic.

"We do not want to see another Ronnie Greene," said Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley. "I hope Nathaniel thinks about that when he makes his lifetime decisions."

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Judge saw boy worth saving

January 19, 2007

BY DESIREE COOPER

FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Thursday marked the end of a 7-year investment that Oakland County Family Court Judge Eugene Arthur Moore has made in the rehabilitation of Nathaniel Abraham. But it's not the end of his lifelong commitment to troubled children.

At 71, he's served on the probate court since 1966, carrying out a family legacy of compassion for kids. It's a commitment that has been in stark contrast to the national trend of giving children adult time for adult crimes, and to his family's experience as victims of a heinous crime committed by two teens.

Perhaps his most notorious ward has been Abraham, who, at age 11, became one of the youngest children in Michigan to be subjected to the possibility of life without parole. But Moore said in court Thursday that his heart remains with all the youngsters in the juvenile justice system.

"Hopefully, the state has learned in this case what they must do to have any hope of success for every delinquent committed to their care," he said.

A judge of second chances

But for Moore's ruling, things easily could have been different for Abraham. In 1996, the Michigan Legislature passed a law allowing prosecutors to try violent children as adults in juvenile court. If convicted, the judge could impose an adult sentence, a juvenile sentence or a blended sentence in which an adult sentence would be imposed if the offender was not rehabilitated by 21.

Moore has resisted the trend of pushing younger and younger offenders into the adult system -- a philosophy that has had an impact on Abraham.

"I'd like to thank you for taking that chance and believing in me," Abraham told the judge Thursday on the occasion of his release.

Moore said he was influenced by his grandfather, a Methodist minister, and his father, Judge Arthur Eugene Moore, who helped found Oakland County's Youth Assistance Program in 1953.

"My father used to bring delinquents home for the weekend," said Moore, whose father's portrait hangs in his courtroom. "He firmly believed that every child could be saved."

Redemption, not revenge

Moore's commitment to troubled children was tested in July 1997, when he learned that his nephew in Texas had been murdered by two 17-year-olds.

According to the Dallas Morning News, Moore's nephew, Brandon Shaw, 20, was carjacked and placed in the trunk, along with another victim. Both drowned when the car was driven into Austin's Town Lake.

"The judge was broken-hearted," said Lisa Shepard, his stepniece. "But he didn't talk about retaliation. He talked about justice. You can't hang on to anger and move forward in life."

A few months later, on Oct. 29, Abraham gunned down Ronnie Greene Jr. outside a Pontiac party store. The Oakland County prosecutor invoked the new law, subjecting the 11-year-old to adult penalties.

But in 2000, Moore sentenced Abraham as a juvenile. He reiterated his thinking Thursday: "The juvenile system had 10 years to rehabilitate him before he would turn 21 and have to be released. If the juvenile system relied on moving him to state prison, they would not be faced with the same urgency to succeed."

The decision subjected Moore to much criticism. But Barbara MacKenzie supported him. She's a regional director at Lutheran Child and Family Service of Michigan, which gave Moore its 2006 Friend of Children Award.

"Judge Moore showed remarkable integrity not imposing the adult sentence," MacKenzie said. "He was sensitive to Nate's age and decided that the juvenile system could help him become a responsible adult."

Lisa Halushka disagreed. She was the Oakland County prosecutor during the trial. Now a professor at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, she still questions why Moore didn't impose a blended sentence.

"He took away his own power to keep Nate off of the streets and the community safe if he wasn't rehabilitated by age 21," she said.

Hoping for the big payback

Nearing retirement, Moore looks forward to living on his horse farm in Oxford and perhaps reprising one of the roles he played in law school as a member of the University of Michigan's Gilbert & Sullivan Society. But for now, he's showing no signs of slowing down.

Despite objections from the prosecutor's office, Moore moved Abraham from the W. J. Maxey Boys Training School near Whitmore Lake to a less restrictive setting last year so that he could gain life skills.

"The most important thing that Nate can do now is to make his life worthwhile," Moore said.

And it's the best way he can thank the judge who looked into the face of an 11-year-old convicted murderer, and saw a life worth saving.

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Judging a free man by his fashion hookup

Abraham's outfit raises eyebrows

January 19, 2007

BY JULIE HINDS

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

It's a widely accepted notion that clothing sends a message. But it's hard to tell sometimes how calculated the message is.

A case in point is the outfit Nathaniel Abraham wore when he became a free man Thursday.

Abraham, who turns 21 today, was convicted of second-degree murder as an adult in 1999 for a crime he committed when he was 11. Abraham left Oakland County Circuit Court wearing an ivory and pink pinstriped suit, a vibrant pink shirt and tie, pink alligator shoes and an ivory hat with a pink band. The ensemble was topped with a rabbit fur coat.

When the photo was posted on the Free Press Web site, comments came in, several of them touching on the clothing, some of them seeing it as a forecast of his future.

"Nice suit!" said one.

Another one said: "He looks like a pimp, he will be back in the system before the end of summer."

"The so-called 'pimp' attire is actually more 'hip-hop chic,' " another countered.

The conversation ranged from the inappropriateness of Abraham's attire to the superficiality of judging someone by appearances.

And the questions still linger: What image did Abraham want to project Thursday, the day he told reporters it felt excellent to be free?

And what image was received by outsiders looking through eyes tempered by their own experience?

Jerry Herron, a professor of American Studies at Wayne State University, said he was reminded of the zoot suits in the opening scenes of Spike Lee's acclaimed film "Malcolm X."

Back in the day, said Herron, zoot suits were a way for people of color to make a style statement on their own terms. The silhouette has survived and evolved through the years.

"This guy could walk into the red carpet of a music awards show and I don't think he'd look out of place," Herron said.

On the other hand, the outfit could be a reflection that Abraham has been out of touch with society and doesn't have a clue about what's appropriate now.

Abraham, who's been in a halfway house, told the Free Press that he bought the clothes himself at O.J. Men's Wear in Saginaw.

Political consultant Mario Morrow wondered if Abraham's lawyer or relatives had advised him on what to wear on a day his story would be in the national spotlight.

"It's like going to a job interview. Who's going to hire him?" Morrow said.

Designer Mark England of Mark England De Mode boutique in downtown Detroit described

the outfit as very bold.

"I'm getting old-school Detroit style. Pink and white. Even the suit is out of season. Gators and brims," he said.

England also said, "I get a message of 'I'm free and this is a new me now. I'm styling and I have my freedom.'"

To older, middle-class eyes, the ensemble may look "way out," said Dr. Robert Perry, a professor of African-American studies at Eastern Michigan University.

But to someone Abraham's age, it could simply mean he, like most young Americans, identifies with the fashions of the hip-hop culture.

Still, Perry said he wouldn't have advised this outfit for such an occasion.

"I would have told him don't come out looking like that right at this point, when the media is going to be there."

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January 19, 2007

State pays Abraham's housing, college tabs

Young killer free after 8 years, wants fresh start

Jennifer Chambers / The Detroit News

PONTIAC -- Yesterday, Nathaniel Abraham was a convicted murderer. Today he greets the morning a free man celebrating his 21st birthday -- with a furnished Bay City apartment paid for by Michigan taxpayers.

Abraham, who was 11 when he shot and killed 18-year-old Ronnie Greene in Pontiac, plans to re-enroll in classes at Delta College, where the state also will foot the tuition bill for the next four years.

Oakland County prosecutors are furious that Abraham -- a felon released Thursday -- is being given free services through a Foster Care Demonstration Project. The pilot program is designed to help Wayne County foster care children who are phased out of the system at age 18 but still need the support of the state.

Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley said the state Department of Human Services ordered Abraham be given a spot in the state-funded pilot program that normally would go to a teen who has been neglected, abused or abandoned by his or her parents, despite the fact that Abraham is no longer a ward of the state and not eligible for such services.

The state ordered the Wayne County program support for Abraham, even though he was from Pontiac and was convicted in Oakland County.

"My point to (the state) was if Wayne County doesn't need that spot, transfer it to Oakland," Carley said. "We have plenty of kids aging out of the system who have nowhere to live and they sure didn't kill somebody."

Under the program, Abraham will be eligible for two years of free rent, full college tuition paid by Michigan Rehabilitation Services through age 25 and food stamps, which he has applied for. He must live in Michigan and attend college in the state to remain eligible in the program.

Maureen Sorbet, spokeswoman for Human Services, said the state so far has only provided Abraham with a security deposit and first month's rent as part of an emergency services program.

Carley said based on meetings she had last week with Abraham's attorneys and state workers on his case, there is no question that Abraham has been given a two-year commitment by the state for services, plus the four years of free tuition.

Abraham, who arrived at Oakland Circuit Court on Thursday wearing a black fur coat, ivory fedora hat and ivory and hot-pink pinstriped suit with matching pink tie and shoes, left through a back door of the courthouse. Daniel Bagdade, Abraham's attorney, said his client paid for the clothes through money he had saved from jobs while in rehabilitation.

Hardest part lies ahead

Bagdade said he is happy that Abraham will receive further assistance. Abraham, whose mother still lives in Pontiac, will begin a full-time job today as a maintenance worker at a manufacturing facility in Bay City.

"The hardest part for Nate is ahead of him," Bagdade said. "It's going to be extremely difficult for Nate to be released and live independently. People think the easy part is him being released. But really the hard part is just beginning -- what he has to do now."

On Thursday, an Oakland County judge released Abraham from juvenile detention. Abraham's case captured national attention in 1997 when, at age 11, he shot and killed Greene with a stolen 22-caliber rifle. Abraham was charged with first-degree murder under a get-tough Michigan law that allows prosecutors to charge juveniles of any age with serious felonies.

The law gave judges the option to sentence juveniles to adult prison time or keep them in juvenile detention until age 21.

After a jury convicted Abraham of second-degree murder, Judge Eugene Arthur Moore rejected any adult punishment and sentenced the young killer to eight years of juvenile detention with a mandated release at age 21.

During those years, Abraham earned his GED and began college classes but continued to struggle with anger management and bucking authority figures.

He got into a few fights at Maxey Boys Training Center and he stole cleaning supplies for his girlfriend at a halfway house, according to Moore, but none of the incidents resulted in further charges.

On Thursday, Moore encouraged Abraham to give thanks to those who have invested years in his rehabilitation and to the Greene family by succeeding in life.

"Nathaniel, you can succeed. You have the guts, the training, the ability, and you can make it," Moore told him Thursday. "But only you can decide what direction you will go."

'Make the best of it'

Abraham, an aspiring rapper, thanked the judge for having faith in him despite nay-sayers who said he would never succeed in life.

"I owe a debt to everybody involved in this case," Abraham told Moore in court. "I'd like to thank you for taking that chance and believing in me. You saw something in me before a lot of people did."

"I'm going to make the best of it."

Nichole Edwards, Ronnie Greene's sister, said whatever progress Abraham has made won't bring her brother back.

"All we have is a cemetery plot to go to," she said.

She does not feel Abraham is remorseful or has truly been rehabilitated.

"One of my biggest fears is that he will get out and cause someone else grief," she said.

Michelle Peoples-Dudley, Abraham's older sister, talked to her brother last week and asked him what he planned to do on his birthday.

"He told me 'I'm not going to do anything. I'm free. I'm just going to relax. I don't have to worry about anyone saying 'It's time to wake up' on my birthday. I get to do what I want and I'm just going to relax.' "

Detroit News Staff Writer Maureen Feighan contributed to this report. You can reach Jennifer Chambers at (248) 647-7402 or jchambers@detnews.com.

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Man who killed at 11 released from all Mich. supervision

1/19/2007, 7:47 a.m. ET

By JEFF KAROUB
The Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — Nathaniel Abraham lost his freedom as a child and gained it as a man. But those surrounding him in court on Thursday said he should take his first unsupervised steps in nearly a decade with great care and caring people.

A judge released Abraham from all state supervision, more than nine years after the then-11-year-old used a rifle to shoot and kill a man outside a Pontiac convenience store.

The 20-year-old man who stood before Oakland County Probate Judge Eugene Moore for his final status hearing on Thursday bore little resemblance to the scared boy whose feet couldn't touch the ground while he sat at the defense table during his 1999 murder trial.

Abraham, a foot taller and 100 pounds heavier than he was at the time of his arrest, has been living in a halfway house in Bay City, 70 miles north of his family in Pontiac. It was in Pontiac that he was convicted of second-degree murder in the 1997 death of 18-year-old Ronnie Lee Greene. Though convicted as an adult, Abraham was sentenced as a juvenile by Moore.

Abraham was the first young person charged with murder to be prosecuted under a 1997 Michigan law that allowed adult prosecutions of children of any age in a serious felony case.

Moore gave a lengthy speech in court Thursday, chronicling Abraham's progress. Highlights included obtaining a high-school diploma in 2005 after being three to four grade levels behind and a growing sense of responsibility for himself and empathy for others.

Moore cited a few missteps, such as fighting and stealing cleaning supplies for his girlfriend, but said "none were very serious" and Nate now had the "guts" to succeed.

"Show us all that you have become a caring, productive member of society," said Moore, who has been stern yet supportive of Abraham over the years.

"I know you can do it. Do it."

Abraham turns 21 on Friday and was expected to be released at that time, but Moore signed the release order Thursday. With that, Abraham was a free man, walking out the door in a pinstripe suit and a fedora. It was a stark contrast from when police arrested the then-sixth-grader at his school, his face painted for Halloween.

Before walking out of the courtroom, he thanked all those involved in his case and said he owed a debt to them. He singled out Moore for taking a chance.

"You saw something in me before a lot of people did," Abraham said. "Sure enough, I'm not going back into society to cause any other families any hurt or harm."

Abraham's arrest in 1997 sparked debate on the treatment of juveniles accused of violent crimes.

Prosecutors at the time said Abraham had hidden the rifle, told people he intended to kill and voiced worry about gangs coming after him. The defense argued the shooting was accidental and that he was aiming at trees and not at Greene.

Abraham's release follows years in a maximum-security facility and a short stay at a medium-security camp. Opinions diverge on how much he's changed in that time.

For Oakland County Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley and Greene's family, the remorse has been

lacking and they don't believe he has been fully rehabilitated.

The offenses might be viewed as minor to others, but Carley said it's only been during the past few months that he stole the supplies from the halfway house and on another occasion left without telling anyone.

"There are so many problems," she said. "This is not success."

Robin Adams, Greene's mother, said she doesn't think Abraham is ready for release, and would prefer that he have an electronic tether on his leg for law enforcement to keep track of him. Still, she hopes he has great deal of private supervision and support.

"I think he should have people right with him," she said. "The main thing is that he get on with his life, and give himself over to the Lord."

Abraham's lawyer, Daniel Bagdade and Abraham's mother, Gloria Abraham-Holland, see a man who has earned a second chance, though they, too, know it will require the help of others.

During his years of lockup, social workers and prosecutors expressed concerns about Abraham's temper. He has been punished for mouthing off and threatening one of his counselors after being fouled during a basketball game, and has taken anger-management training.

But on Thursday, those who worked with Abraham during his time in state custody said he had worked hard at controlling his anger and expressed hope that he would make a success of his future.

"I know he can do it with the help of the Lord and the support of his family," said Abraham-Holland, who added that the family was to gather Friday to celebrate her son's birthday.

"He's come a long way and we're proud of him. We're standing by him."

Bagdade, who has represented Abraham since his arrest, said his client has an apartment in Bay City, where he plans to work in maintenance for a manufacturing company and attend classes at Delta College. He would also like to parlay eight years' worth of lyrics and poetry into a music career.

Even with the help of others, Bagdade said there is no reason that Abraham can't responsibly exercise his independence.

"He's going back to his own apartment — his own apartment," said Bagdade, with a look of relief after a decade of defending Abraham. "He's going to sleep in his own bed and watch what he wants to watch ... without anyone telling him what to do."

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'I'm going to make the best of it'

Nathaniel Abraham, 21, set free 10 years after murder

PUBLISHED: January 19, 2007

By Stephen Frye
Journal Register News Service

After nearly a decade as a ward of the state and spending all of his teenage years in lockup, Nathaniel Abraham walked out of court a free man at noon Thursday after a judge signed his release.

Convicted of second-degree murder in the 1997 shooting death of 18-year-old Ronnie Greene Jr. in Pontiac, Abraham's tenure in custody had to end by today -- his 21st birthday -- because he was sentenced as a juvenile.

On Thursday, his final appearance before Oakland County Chief Probate Judge Eugene Arthur Moore contained a promise by Abraham not to squander a second chance.

Abraham, who at 11 was the youngest person convicted of murder as an adult in Michigan -- and perhaps in the nation -- was driven to his Bay City apartment by workers from the halfway house he has lived in for the past several months.

"It's a burden that has been lifted," said his mother, Gloria Abraham-Holland. "I'm very happy, overjoyed. I think he's going to be OK."

She and Abraham's grandfather, sister and friends were with him in court for what they hoped would be the last time.

"Any good mother would take some responsibility," his mother said. "You can be the best of moms, and the worst of things can happen."

Abraham's sister, Michelle Peoples-Dudley, said her brother is respectful, kind and thoughtful. He wants to use his experience to help others, she said.

Family members were planning to throw a party today to celebrate Abraham's 21st birthday.

"He's going back to his own apartment and he's going to sleep in his own bed," said Daniel Bagdade, who has been Abraham's attorney since the case started with his arrest in the Oct. 29, 1997, shooting outside a Baldwin Street party store.

He said Abraham will start a new job working maintenance in a manufacturing plant in the Bay City area.

"He got it himself," Bagdade said. "He just wants to lay low. He just wants to become an ordinary member of society. He just wants to blend in."

In court, Abraham -- dressed in a cream-colored pinstripe suit, a wide-brimmed white hat with hot pink hatband, hot pink alligator shoes and matching red socks and shirt -- kept his head down and shoulders slumped for parts of the hour-long hearing as attorneys, social workers, mentors and the judge offered their final opinions of his journey through the juvenile justice system.

The young man admitted he had been given "a second chance at life," and he thanked the judge and everyone who invested time to help him "for taking a chance and believing in me."

"I'm going to make the best of it," Abraham told the judge. "I am going to take it one day at a time."

After walking out the front door of the courthouse, wearing a fur coat, he said he was thinking of the future.

Guarded optimism

Not everyone was pleased with the final hearing, as prosecutors worried about what the future holds for the 21-year-old.

Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca worried that the scene was too jovial, with too many congratulations offered to Abraham. Before Gorcyca and his chief deputy, Deborah Carley, walked in with eight members of Greene's family, the various social workers and lawyers involved exchanged pleasantries more familiar to a graduation.

"What he needed was tough love," Gorcyca said. "Hopefully, we can be proud of what he can do."

Carley was more blunt, saying if Abraham had been given a blended sentence -- meaning he would have been placed in the juvenile system with the option of prison at age 21 -- she would have asked for a 10- or 12-year prison term.

"I don't think he has been completely rehabilitated," Carley said, citing Abraham's troubles at the Bay City halfway house, which included taking cleaning items for his girlfriend without permission and leaving the facility improperly. "He still has a lot to learn."

Abraham also had yelled at staff, shown disrespect for counselors and had altercations on the basketball court, according to court testimony.

Carley also expressed concern over the method the state used to assist Abraham, granting him some benefits given to abused or neglected foster children when they age out of the system. For the juvenile justice division, those benefits expire at age 21, Carley said, while in Abraham's case, he'll now be given two years of housing and food stamps.

'Nathaniel, ... show us'

After comments from about a dozen people, Judge Moore spoke at length about this case and the goals of the juvenile justice system.

The judge said Abraham can best show his "regrets and sympathy to the (Greene) family to whom (he) caused so much grief by succeeding, by being a decent human being."

The judge detailed Abraham's experiences, from years at W.J. Maxey Boys Training Center before entering a lesser security facility in northern mid-Michigan to the halfway house last fall.

Abraham -- who had early experience with drugs and was a suspect in numerous minor crimes before the shooting -- underwent extensive counseling for substance abuse and anger management. The judge said Abraham showed progress when he graduated from high school.

The judge said the biggest shortfall in the system was vocational training, though over the years Abraham has discussed being a barber, basketball player or rap singer. Most recently, Bagdade said Abraham has considered a career in music, as he has taken to writing poetry and lyrics.

Abraham also recently started speaking to groups of juveniles about his experiences.

Moore explained his rejection of the blended sentence, saying he "wanted the juvenile justice system to do their job and not pass the buck to our state prisons."

Adult prison, Moore said, does little to protect the public once offenders are released.

"A child was responsible for killing Ronnie Greene Jr. and causing such unimaginable grief for his family," Moore said. "What we have is a family court judge telling the state of Michigan to raise an 11-year-old child who has committed murder. Juvenile justice is about rehabilitation. We cannot treat a portion of our children as 'throw-away' youth."

Moore implored Abraham to make his mark in the system.

"How? Through your actions," the judge told him. "Show us all that you have become a caring, productive member of our society."

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THE DAILY OAKLAND PRESS

Nate walks free

Of The Oakland Press

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"It's a burden that has been lifted," said his mother, Gloria Abraham-Holland. "I'm very happy, overjoyed. I think he's going to be OK."

His family from Pontiac planned to visit him for a quiet, private birthday celebration.

"He's going back to his own apartment and he's going to sleep in his own bed," said Daniel Bagdade, who has been Abraham's attorney since the case started with his arrest in the Oct. 29, 1997, shooting outside a Baldwin Street party store.

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"What he needed was tough love," Gorcyca said. "Hopefully, we can be proud of what he can do."

Carley was more blunt, saying if Abraham had been given a blended sentence - meaning he would have been placed in the juvenile system with the option of prison at age 21 - she would have asked for a 10- or 12-year prison term.

"I don't think he has been completely rehabilitated," Carley said, citing Abraham's troubles at the Bay City halfway house, which included taking cleaning items for his girlfriend without permission and leaving the facility improperly. "He still has a lot to learn."

Abraham also had yelled at staff, shown disrespect for counselors and had altercations on the basketball court, according to court testimony.

Carley also expressed concern over the method the state used to assist Abraham, granting him some benefits given to abused or neglected foster children when they age out of the system. For the juvenile justice division, those benefits expire at age 21, Carley said, while in Abraham's case, he'll now be given two years of housing and food stamps.

'Nathaniel, ... show us'

After comments from about a dozen people, Judge Moore spoke at length about this case and the goals of the juvenile justice system.

The judge said Abraham can best show his "regrets and sympathy to the (Greene) family to whom (he) caused so much grief by succeeding, by being a decent human being."

The judge detailed Abraham's experiences, from years at W.J. Maxey Boys Training Center before entering a lesser security facility in northern mid-Michigan to the halfway house last fall.

Abraham - who had early experience with drugs and was a suspect in numerous minor crimes before the shooting - underwent extensive counseling for substance abuse and anger management. The judge said Abraham showed progress when he graduated from high school.

The judge said the biggest shortfall in the system was vocational training, though over the years Abraham has discussed being a barber, basketball player or rap singer. Most recently, Bagdade said Abraham has considered a career in music, as he has taken to writing poetry and lyrics.

Abraham also recently started speaking to groups of juveniles about his experiences.

Moore said his rejection of the blended sentence, saying he "wanted the juvenile justice system to do their job and not pass the buck to our state prisons."

Adult prison, Moore said, does little to protect the public once offenders are released.

"A child was responsible for killing Ronnie Greene Jr. and causing such unimaginable grief for his family," Moore said. "What we have is a family court judge telling the state of Michigan to raise an 11-year-old child who has committed murder. Juvenile justice is about rehabilitation. We cannot treat a portion of our children as 'throwaway' youth."

Moore implored Abraham to make his mark in the system.

"How? Through your actions," the judge told him. "Show us all that you have become a caring, productive member of our society.

"Will he succeed? No one knows for sure, and no one has control of the outcome except Nathaniel Abraham."

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http://www.theoaklandpress.com/stories/011907/loc_2007011927.shtml



Abraham's family is 'overjoyed'

Of The Oakland Press

PONTIAC - Gloria Abraham-Holland said her family is finally whole again. Her son, Nathaniel Abraham, was set free Thursday after spending almost the last decade in the juvenile justice system for killing a man when he was 11. "We are overjoyed," she said, smiling.

Abraham-Holland and Abraham's grandfather, sister and friends were with him in court for what they hoped would be the last time.

Abraham grew from a boy into a teenager and then a man as a ward of the state.

"It's been really hard" on the family, said grandfather Tommy Williams. As other people raised her son, Abraham-Holland reflected on her role in his life. "Any good mother would take some responsibility," she said. "You can be the best of moms, and the worst of things can happen."

Abraham-Holland said in court that she wants to tell her son to take to heart everything he was told by people who worked with him through the years - therapists, social workers, mentors and others. "He has come a long way, and we are very proud of him, and we love him," she said. Abraham's sister, Michelle Peoples-Dudley, said her brother is respectful, kind and thoughtful. He wants to use his experience to help others, she said.

Family members were planning to throw a party today to celebrate Abraham's 21st birthday.

Williams said his grandson hopes to work in management one day. His lawyer, Daniel Bagdade, has said Abraham is interested in a music career.

He'll make his fresh start in Bay City, where an apartment and job are waiting.

"He wants the state to know and see the progress, and he wants (them) to read about him one day being successful," Peoples-Dudley said. "His biggest goal is to show them he's made it."

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Muskegon Chronicle

Mother faces charge after baby's death

Friday, January 19, 2007

By Lisa Medendorp

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A mother whose 3-month-old daughter died in November has been charged with abusing the baby, but not with causing the infant's death.

Viola "Tiny" Walker died on Nov. 8 at 1350 Eastwood in Muskegon.

An autopsy revealed approximately 30 minor bone fractures, but "the medical examiner said the broken bones did not result in the baby's death," said Brett Gardner, Muskegon County chief assistant prosecutor.

Authorities have charged Linda Marie Walker, 28, of 611 Ada, with first-degree child abuse, a 15-year felony.

"During the course of the investigation and the interview, she admitted to causing some of the injuries," said Muskegon Detective Emilio Trejo. He said the baby sustained arm, leg and rib fractures.

The mother "admitted that she lost control and caused injury to the baby," Trejo said. "We're focusing on one particular incident, about 10 to 12 days before the death of the baby."

Walker was arraigned Tuesday before 60th District Judge Harold F. Closz III. A \$10,000 signature bond was posted with the condition she have no contact with minor children.

Muskegon County Prosecutor Tony Tague said his office would seek a significant prison sentence if she is convicted of abusing the baby.

"This child had a series of unfortunate events in her short life," Tague said. "The child was born prematurely and had the frailties associated with that premature birth. It is clear from our investigation that the mother abused the child, based on both the autopsy results as well as admissions by the mother.

"Unfortunately, the medical examiner was unable to associate the death with abuse, and thus we are unable to hold her legally responsible for the death."

An attempt to reach Walker this morning at a telephone number listed on court paperwork was unsuccessful. She did not have an attorney at the time of arraignment.

Preliminary examination has been set for Jan. 29.

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FRIDAY JANUARY 19, 2007 Last modified: *Thursday, January 18, 2007 4:41 PM EST*

Parents charged in dog bite

Felony child abuse charges are filed against a Rome Township couple.

From staff reports

ADRIAN — A Rome Township couple face felony child abuse charges for bringing a pit bull terrier into their home that mauled their 10-year-old son on Dec. 30. The boy was taken to a Toledo hospital for treatment of severe wounds to his left arm, according to Lenawee County Sheriff's Department reports.

The boy's mother, Amanda Jane Gilbert, 30, was arraigned Monday in Lenawee County District Court and his stepfather, Kelly James O'Neill, 34, was arraigned Wednesday. Both face second-degree child abuse charges that carry maximum four-year prison terms. They are also charged with misdemeanor counts for failure to license or vaccinate three pit bull terriers police found at their home on U.S. 223.

Gilbert called for help after a male pit bull terrier attacked her son inside their home at about 7:15 p.m. on Dec. 30. Sheriff's department reports said she pulled the dog off her son. She and the boy then shut themselves inside a bathroom for safety.

The dog kept an ambulance crew from entering the house until O'Neill arrived home and was able to lock it inside a cage, reports said.

The boy was taken first to Bixby Medical Center before being transferred to a hospital in Toledo for treatment of severe injuries to his forearm and serious bite wounds to his upper arm. Gilbert was also bitten while struggling with the dog, reports said.

All three dogs were taken to the Lenawee Humane Society shelter in Adrian for observation. The male pit bull was euthanized Jan. 1 after staff there reported it was acting viciously toward them.

Deputies reported O'Neill agreed on Dec. 30 that the attack was unprovoked and the dog should be put down.

The dog, named "Diesel," was given to the couple a few weeks earlier by a cousin of Gilbert. Deputies interviewed the couple who previously owned the dog and reported they said they gave it away because of its attitude. They got the dog from another family member who told them it was too aggressive to be around their children.

Gilbert and O'Neill are accused of child abuse for failing to protect the 10-year-old boy from a dog known to be dangerous.

A deputy reported Gilbert said the attack happened while the dog was loose inside the home. She said she and her son were eating in the dining room and playing when the dog came inside the house. She said the dog jumped at her and came down on her son, biting his arm.

O'Neill told deputies the dog had not been fed for a day before the incident because of financial problems the family was having.



Muskegon Chronicle

Longer limits needed to get child predators

Thursday, January 18, 2007

Two sordid abuse cases involving local priests begs for a review of state limits on the prosecution of sex crimes against children, as we see it. In both instances, the law's reach is limited due to the period of time between the alleged incidents and their reporting to authorities.

Statutes of limitation, as these windows for prosecution are known, are grounded in sensible law. Often, if an unreasonable amount of time passes between the criminal act and the bringing of charges, witnesses may have died or moved, memories grow old and the need for justice is less keenly felt. Removing all statutes of limitation would quickly clog up the legal system.

Yet there are exceptions, such as the taking of another human life. And there should be others to cover cases such as the ones that have recently rocked the Muskegon Catholic community family. Among those exceptions should be any rape, molestation, torture or first-degree criminal sexual conduct cases where the victim is a minor child.

The Muskegon cases concern two priests who have since been removed from their ministries. One has been placed on sabbatical "for health reasons." That priest served in the Muskegon Heights Parish at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in 1976 and 1977, and is accused of sexually abusing young boys. The second accused priest, who also has been defrocked, served at St. Jean Baptiste Catholic Church at the time of the alleged abuse of a young boy who stayed overnight at his home.

We say "alleged" in both cases because with no charges having been brought and no trials held, there is still a presumption of innocence.

Cases involving children may need additional time to develop legally due to their special and sensitive nature. But the two cases cited above suggest lawmakers need to revisit current statute of limitation laws, with an eye towards changing these if it allows sexual predators getting off the hook for their crimes.

Thomas E. Fallon

The Chronicle family at-large, and newspapering in general, has lost a dear friend in Tom Fallon, who died last week. Fallon, who served as the former editor of the Bay City Times, had deep roots in Muskegon and at its daily paper, and he was always interested in the doings of his beloved hometown. Fallon was 87 at his death.

While at The Chronicle, Fallon was a reporter, assistant sports editor, state editor, assistant city editor and finally city editor in charge of the local news operation. He was Bay City's editor-in-chief from 1969-81. After retirement, Fallon continued in the business as a consultant for Booth Newspapers, then the parent corporation of both The Chronicle and Bay City Times.

Fallon will be remembered by surviving veterans of World War II, since it was he who started the popular "In the Service" column in The Chronicle about local men in the Armed Forces. In 1942, Fallon himself enlisted and was assigned to the U.S. Army Air Corps, a forerunner of the U.S. Air Force. Fallon served through the war's duration until 1945 in the European Theater of War, winning a Bronze Star along the way as a radio operator aboard a B-17 bomber "for highly meritorious achievement in support of combat operations against an enemy of the United States."

He also made the acquaintance of another enlistee, movie star Clark Gable, whom Fallon pronounced as "only another soldier" among the men. "Now if Shirley Temple had shown up, that might have been different," he once quipped.

The ex-city editor was a regular visitor to Muskegon on various charitable endeavors, such as judging the

Miss Michigan Pageant or serving as a master of ceremonies for the Muskegon Area Sports Hall of Fame banquet. He was an eloquent speaker who commanded the audience's attention with his wit and sincerity. Occasionally, a reporter or editor would receive a note of praise if Fallon, who watched over things here from Bay City, felt the occasion demanded one.

Individuals like Tom Fallon gave The Muskegon Chronicle an extraordinary identity through their ability to reach out to readers, if only because he was one of them. We know those readers who knew Tom will mourn his passing, as we do here at Third and Clay.

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Health Tip: Warning Signs of Child Abuse

(HealthDay News) -- Many children who are being abused are afraid or unable to talk to someone about what's happening to them.

Nonetheless, there are warning signs of child abuse that a teacher, neighbor parent, caretaker, or friend can observe.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway offers this list of possible symptoms:

- Sudden behavior changes or changes in the quality of school work.
- Difficulty concentrating that cannot be attributed to other factors.
- Unattended medical needs that have been brought to a caretaker's attention.
- Acting withdrawn or generally disinterested.
- Feelings or facial expressions suggesting that something bad is always about to happen.
- Avoiding the home or abuser, and arriving early and staying late for activities.

-- Diana Kohnle

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January 19, 2007

Groups Offer Health Plan for Coverage of Uninsured

By [ROBERT PEAR](#)

WASHINGTON, Jan. 18 — A broad coalition of business and consumer groups, doctors, hospitals and drug companies laid out a major proposal on Thursday to provide health coverage to more than half of the nation's 47 million uninsured by expanding federal benefit programs and offering new tax credits to individuals and families.

"This is a proposal not for mandates but for incentives," said Dr. Reed V. Tuckson, senior vice president of UnitedHealth Group, one of the nation's largest insurers. "It's a careful balance of public and private solutions."

The proposal, unveiled Thursday after more than two years of work, was endorsed by 16 groups including [AARP](#), the American Hospital Association, the [American Medical Association](#), the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, Johnson & Johnson, Kaiser Permanente, Pfizer and the Chamber of Commerce of the United States.

Other coalition members endorsing the proposal were Families USA, a liberal-leaning consumer group, and America's Health Insurance Plans, a trade group for insurers.

The proposal comes at a possible turning point in the debate over national health insurance, which has been an elusive goal for Democrats since the New Deal. In the past few years, businesses of all sizes have said that health costs are cutting their profits and hurting their ability to compete. Politicians of both parties predict that the health care issue will figure prominently in the 2008 presidential campaign.

Without waiting for Congress, states like Massachusetts and California are expanding coverage, but want help from Washington.

As a first step, the 16-member group, known as the Health Coverage Coalition for the Uninsured, urged Congress to put more money into the Children's Health Insurance Program and create tax breaks for the purchase of private insurance covering children. Money for the program is running low, and many children are eligible but not enrolled.

Members of the coalition said their proposal would cost \$45 billion in the first five years. They did not estimate the cost of insuring millions of adults in later years, nor did they suggest how to pay the costs. Dr. Tuckson said that "the cost of inaction is higher than the cost of action."

Ronald F. Pollack, the executive director of Families USA, said, "Our agreement transcends political and ideological boundaries."

But tensions bubbled below the surface, showing how difficult it could be to translate the recommendations into law. The [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), the [Service Employees International Union](#) and the [National Association of Manufacturers](#) participated in the coalition for more than a year but did not endorse the final report. The deepest divisions came over how to pay for expanded coverage and who should foot the bill.

Andrew L. Stern, president of the service employees' union, supports health insurance for all but has said that the "employer-based system of health coverage is over" and that it "is collapsing, crushed by out-of-control costs." By contrast, members of the coalition said they wanted to preserve and build on that system.

E. Neil Trautwein, former assistant vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers, said the proposal had "little reference to fiscal realities."

JoAnn C. Volk, a policy analyst at the A.F.L.-C.I.O., said she favored expanding government programs. "But tax credits would not guarantee access to comprehensive coverage and could leave consumers with high out-of-pocket costs," Ms. Volk said.

Suzanne DeFrancis, a spokeswoman for the [Department of Health and Human Services](#), said: "We all share the goal of helping people get health insurance. The administration believes this can be done best by helping people buy their own insurance, rather than creating a new government entitlement to health care or raising taxes."

More than eight million children are uninsured. At least two-thirds are eligible for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program. One way to cover these children would be to enroll them automatically in Medicaid or the children's insurance program if they qualified for food stamps or reduced-price school lunches, the coalition said.

In general, Medicaid is available to children under 19 in families with incomes below the poverty level, about \$16,600 for a family of three. The coalition said Congress should provide tax credits to families with incomes from 100 percent to 300 percent of the poverty level, to help them buy coverage for children.

The coalition offered longer-term recommendations, saying that states should have the option to expand Medicaid to cover all adults with incomes below the poverty level.

"Day after day, there is debate and discussion," Dr. Tuckson said. "Day after day, people die. We are sick and tired of the debate. We are focusing on what is achievable."

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THE BAY CITY TIMES

New health care provider offers free drug card

Friday, January 19, 2007

By **RYAN J. STANTON**

TIMES WRITER

It might sound too good to be true, but John Johnson says there's no catch to his company's latest offer.

Now through Jan. 27, all Bay County residents can pick up a free pharmacy discount card and start saving on prescription drug costs.

The discount card, complements of Bay County's newest health care provider, Metro Health Network, is being offered as a promotion along with Berner Medical Systems.

Johnson, president and CEO of Metro Health, called it a "good will gesture" that benefits both county residents and his company, which recently moved into Bay Regional Medical Center's new medical mall at 4175 Euclid Ave.

"We're new to the area and we want to kind of jump start what we're doing and get our name out there," he said. "But it turns out it works really well for the citizens, too."

While county residents can realize pharmaceutical savings of about 25 percent on average, and in many cases even more, Johnson said, his company gets a chance to market itself to area residents who lack health care coverage.

"The card works best for people who have no prescription benefits whatsoever," Johnson said, mentioning that the card can be used at most major pharmacies in the area. He also said the card has no expiration date.

Residents can pick up the discount cards at any of seven locations, including RediMed at the new medical mall and Pinconning Medical Center in Pinconning.

Metro Health recently rolled out a similar discount card that was popular downstate in the Macomb County city of Warren. The company has plans to offer the same card in Midland, Saginaw, Gladwin and Ogemaw counties.

While Bay County's Health Department already offers a similar discount card, Johnson said, it's limited to seniors and costs \$20.

County Board Chairman Kim Coonan, D-6th District, said he hopes the new card can lend a helping hand to some residents.

"You'd almost have to see what particular drug you are using, and what it's going to be discounted at," he said. "It could help some residents that don't have prescription drug coverage."

Coonan, who considers health care in a dire state in the U.S., suggests residents shop around at different pharmacies.

The state has a Web site, www.michigandrugprices.com, that lets customers compare drug prices in their local area. For example, on Tuesday in Bay City, prices for the same dosage of Zoloft ranged from \$59 to \$97.87 depending on where consumers picked up their prescription.

All that aside, Coonan sees a larger problem, one in which millions of people in the nation lack health care.

"Somehow we have to do something to reduce the escalation of health care," he said. "And until you get all of the parties sitting down at the table, it's a train wreck."

Johnson points to statistics that show 15 percent of Michigan residents have no health care, and that means no pharmacy coverage. He's hoping his company can be an alternative solution for those who fall in that category.

In addition to its free discount card, Metro Health will be offering a combination discount card that includes dental, vision, pharmacy and chiropractic for \$69 a year, Johnson said.

The company has another plan that includes primary care and pharmacy, in which enrollees pay \$49.95 a month, and then can see their physician unlimited times for a

\$10 co-pay each time.

For more information about Metro Health and other locations to pick up a discount card, call 1-866-637-6800 or visit www.metrohealthnetwork.com.

- Ryan J. Stanton covers

Bay County for The Times. He can be reached at 894-9645 or by e-mail at rstanton@bc-times.com.

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January 19, 2007

Mark Gaffney: Labor Voices

Restore fairness to jobless benefits

Raise maximum payment, expand eligibility to help those most in need



By now, residents know that Michigan is "ground zero" in the new global economy. While consumers may get cheaper goods and companies can increase their bottom line by expanding overseas, Michiganians still lose jobs.

While the changing economy may be beneficial in the long run, the short-run adjustments of unemployment (which can last a year or more) are painful. The unemployment safety net is not helping distressed and jobless workers and needs to be reformed.

In November 2006, 329,000 men and women were collecting unemployment insurance; that's 6.5 percent of Michigan's work force. Our unemployment rate hasn't dropped below 4.5 percent (the national average) since December 2000. And those numbers don't count people whose benefits have run out because they were unemployed for longer than 26 weeks and still couldn't find another decent job.

Limits to public aid

The jobless assistance system can be less helpful than residents realize. After filing out the unemployment benefits application, unemployed workers have three days to submit their resume with the Michigan Works! Agency. If their employer doesn't object, a worker might collect the maximum unemployment benefit in Michigan of \$362 a week for between 14 and 26 weeks.

If workers lose their job due to foreign competition (as certified by the federal government), they may receive trade adjustment or readjustment benefits. These include some funding (often not enough for all eligible) for training for up to two years, income support for an additional 13 weeks and a health care tax credit.

If the government fails to recognize that foreign trade cost workers their jobs, they only get 26 weeks of jobless benefits.

After looking for a decent-paying job for a long time, some workers have to settle for a job that pays much less. This was the case for our member Jim from Stanton, who worked with Electrolux for 27 years and was firmly in the middle class before being laid off in March of 2006.

To make ends meet, Jim took a full-time seasonal position at a golf course that was more than \$6 an hour less than his former job, with no health care and pension benefits. Jim and his wife have been forced to make dramatic changes, a very difficult task for a couple with grandchildren who now see the hopes of their "golden years" fading away.

Many workers have found another job, only to be laid off again soon afterward. After losing a good-paying job she held at a manufacturing company for 14 years, Connie from Leslie was hired and laid off four times in five years. Several times, Connie was unemployed long enough for the unemployment benefits to run out. She recently became a forklift operator. Though the pay isn't what it once was, Connie is very happy to be eligible for benefits and enjoys her new job.

Some never recover

Finally, there are those unfortunate laid-off workers who don't find work, even after their unemployment benefits expire. Christina from Michigan's west side, a veteran of the Coast Guard, has applied for many jobs in several areas; including health care, child care and service. She has only found a part-time job for 12 hours a week. Health care bills from a recent family emergency are starting to pile up.

It's clear the new Legislature should restore fairness and effectiveness to Michigan's unemployment system. The maximum unemployment benefit level has not kept up with inflation since 1995. A one-time \$62 increase in the maximum was enacted in 2002; however, that was five years ago. We are now behind other states like Kentucky, North Carolina and Pennsylvania in benefit levels.

In the Legislature or Congress, we should establish an automatic 13-week extension of benefits when the unemployment rate is above a certain level within a state. Eligibility standards should be revised to make it easier for part-time and low-wage workers to receive benefits. They need the most help.

So many economic concerns in America have been addressed by reducing taxes, often for the wealthy. We could eliminate the state income tax on unemployment benefits and help working people, too.

This is no longer just a problem for blue-collar workers. Financial analysis, architectural drafting, accounting and radiology jobs are being outsourced an ocean away. Soon it will be your college-graduate son or daughter or your near-retirement accountant father who gets laid off. No part of any corporation remains untouchable in the global economy.

By far, the workers who must receive unemployment are good, hard-working people who prefer to work. They deserve fair and adequate treatment as they bear the costs and the pain of a changing global economy.

Mark Gaffney is president of the Michigan AFL-CIO, a federation of Michigan labor groups. E-mail: letters@detnews.com.

Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written for The News on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. The News hopes to provide a forum for discussing workplace issues that are critical to a large segment of Michigan's population, whether or not they

are union members. Look for Labor Voices every Friday in The News.

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State Taking In \$762.4M Less Money, Deficit Much Deeper

MIRS, January 18, 2007

The state is projected to take in \$762.4 million less money this fiscal year than previously thought, but the size of the state's budget hole appears to be much larger, according to information gathered from today's Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference (CREC).

On the official side, State Treasurer Robert **KLEINE** and House Fiscal Agency (HFA) Director Mitch **BEAN** and Senate Fiscal Agency (SFA) Director Gary **OLSON** did agree that the state of Michigan in Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 will take in \$762.4 million less money they projected at the May 2006 CLEC. This determination means lawmakers and the Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM** will either need to cut that much in state spending or raise that much in new revenue in the next eight months.

And if money generated by the Single Business Tax (SBT) isn't replaced, the size of the hole for Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 is just over \$900 million.

So, why are different numbers floating around regarding the size of the state's budget deficit? It's because analysts are eyeing other hits to the state budget that are expected to push the deficit numbers even deeper.

Remember, today's meeting only officially resolved the revenue side of the question. It didn't resolve the spending side of the ledger, which has its own problems.

For example, *MIRS* reported earlier today that Olson, at the close of this morning's meeting, said the current fiscal year deficit stands at \$819 million (\$442 million in the General Fund and \$377 million School Aid Fund). Apparently, the administration is looking at an even higher number than that.

So, why the roughly \$60 million difference in Olson's deficit number and the \$762.4 million revenue shortfall officially released today? Largely, it's because of one major factor and several smaller, unresolved factors.

Included in the numbers the SFA chief cited are dollars involved in an ongoing dispute between tobacco companies that are party to the Master Tobacco Settlement and the state over just how much Big Tobacco owes the state.

That dispute has resulted in throwing into question \$86 million in revenues. One payment of \$36.4 million that was to have been made last April has already been thrown into escrow until the dispute is resolved. Attorney General Mike **COX**'s office apparently believes another \$50 million payment that should be made to the state in April of this year will also go into escrow. That means some \$86 million in tobacco dollars are thrown into doubt. Olson included some or all of that number in his calculations.

Other disputes also are outstanding. For example, how much did the Department of Corrections, the Department of Human Services and the State Police overspend their budgets in FY 2006?

How much will the state realize in land sale revenues? The House Fiscal Agency (HFA) is penciling in \$47 million. SFA is penciling in \$28 million. Other differences yet to be resolved include revenue sharing payments to local governments.

So, what exactly was decided today?

The following are the official numbers and the amount of reduction they represent from revenue estimates set last May. Those revenue estimates underpin the current year's budget. But, before even getting to the current year's revenue problems, the meeting today identified the size of the revenue problems being carried forward from last fiscal year.

Here are the numbers according to fiscal year:

Last Fiscal Year's Problems:

To understand the nature of the current fiscal year budget problems, one has to go back to FY 2006.

The current FY 2007 budget was based on a roughly \$100 million being left over from last year. Today, the principals of the Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference determined exactly where they believe final revenues will come in for last fiscal year's budget.

Recall, there's been no book closing yet for FY 2006, so final numbers could change.

- FY 2006 School Aid Fund revenues were downgraded by \$90.5 million
- FY 2006 General Fund revenues were revised downward by \$115.9 million

So, going into the current fiscal year, there is a combined \$206.4 million revenue reduction, not including, as mentioned above, possible spending problems.

The Current Fiscal Year's Problem

Besides last year's accumulated red ink, which still isn't finalized yet, this year's budget has problems of its own on the revenue side.

Today, officials agreed that revenues coming in to support the current fiscal year (FY 2007), the General Fund is falling short:

- FY 2007 School Aid Fund revenues were revised downward by \$322.4 million
- FY 2007 General Fund revenues were revised downward by \$233.7 million

The net result is a combined FY 2007 revenue reduction of \$556.1 million combined with the \$206.4 leftover from FY 2006, the total number is \$762.5 million.

Recovery May Not Be Had Until 2020

MIRS, January 18, 2007

The news today about declining revenues was bad (see related story).

News that Michigan may not completely climb out of an economic recession that started in 2000 for another 12 years was even worse.

During his presentation today at the Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference, Dr. George **FULTON** with Research Seminar on Quantitative Economics (RSQE), told the panel that if you take the fastest four years of growth from the 1990s and extrapolated that out from 2008 when the recovery is projected to start, Michigan wouldn't recover to 2000 job levels until early 2013.

The U of M economist noted that between 2000 and 2008, the state will have lost 367,000 jobs. Gaining those jobs back is what will take time.

Gary **OLSON**, director of the Senate Fiscal Agency (SFA), remarked that his group is forecasting Michigan won't return to 2000 job levels until 2020 — an estimate Fulton said wasn't out of line.

"What's clear from this, is the problem for Michigan is not cyclical, it's structural," Fulton added. Ultimately, the economists said that Michigan's woes can be directly traced back to the misfortune of the domestic auto industry.

To illustrate the point, Fulton said the auto industry is 635 times more concentrated in Michigan than in the nation as a whole. If one removed the auto sector and just looked at manufacturing, manufacturing in Michigan is merely four times more concentrated than in the nation as a whole.

"If the auto industry is in trouble, Michigan is in trouble, and of course that's the case," Fulton said.

On the budget side, State Budget Director Bob **EMERSON** told *MIRS* today not to expect any executive order budget reductions, or other solutions to address the estimated \$700 to \$800 million immediate problems the state faces until the second week of February.

"Now that we know the official numbers, we're going to take a look at it and present the governor with all the options," Emerson said. "I think it's pretty safe to say on the eighth [of February] we'll have a comprehensive set of solutions to present."

Emerson, who also admitted to *MIRS* that 2007 is shaping up to bring the most difficult set of budget and fiscal issues he's seen in a single year since he came to Lansing, said nothing is off the table.

"I don't think you can fix this with just efficiencies," Emerson added. "I mean we've been doing this for six years. We've done six years of cutting and six years of one-time solutions. There's a structural problem in addition to doing away with the Single Business Tax."

In 2007, lawmakers will first have to resolve the shortfall that's been known about for a while. However, what the fiscal experts had to say about the budget and economy was, well, shocking.

"We expect continued declines in wage and salary employment going forward," Mitch **BEAN**, director of the House Fiscal Agency (HFA) told *MIRS*. "The biggest concern is (the General Fund) with respect to state revenues, in that I personally don't see revenues improving out until 2010."

Bean cited a couple of major problems. First, is the known revenue problems caused by a weak economy that forecasters from the University of Michigan's RSQE say won't begin to recover until late 2008.

In 2009, the state also will have the effects of the newly passed Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) swing into effect. Recall, the EITC was adopted as part of a deal to resolve technical problems with the state's new minimum wage law. In '09 the EITC will cost the state \$130 million. That number swells to \$300 million in 2010. The economy, the EITC and other issues have Bean arguing that even through 2010, any possible revenue growth has already been spent.

While economic recovery isn't forecast to even begin for Michigan until late 2008, total recovery from the current downward spiral isn't expected to be completed until as late as 2020, or 12 years from now.

On the Senate side, Senate Appropriations Chair Ron **JELINEK** (R-Three Oaks) admitted that government efficiencies alone won't solve this problem.

"We've done a lot of that already," Jelinek said. "There may be a few dollars here and there, and we'll look for those in every budget, but I don't believe that's going to cover all of this."

Jelinek said while there isn't a great flavor for raising revenues, there may have to be some "give and take."

"People still look to government for personal services, we're going to have to maintain that," he added. "We're in a hard spot."